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Mideast Intrigue

PLO Operative, Slain Reputedly by Israelis, Had Been Helping U.S.

Figure in Munich Massacre
Died in a 1979 Explosion;
Role in Diplomats' Safety

Arafat's American Channel?

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WASHINGTON—On Jan. 22, 1979, an official of the Palestine Liberation Organization named Ali Hassan Salameh was killed in a car-bomb explosion in Beirut. One of the most notorious PLO terrorists during the early 1970s, he had helped plan the seizure of Israeli athletes at the 1972 summer Olympics in Munich. "We have lost a lion," said PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat.

Mr. Salameh's corpse carried a hint that he was an unusual lion. In one of the dead man's pockets, according to a close friend, was a message sent that day from Bashir Gemayel—the leader of the Lebanese Phalangist militia and normally a ferocious enemy of the PLO—warning Mr. Salameh that his life was in danger.

Shortly after the assassination, Adm. Stansfield Turner, then the director of the Central Intelligence Agency, briefed President Carter on the incident. The CIA's information about who had killed Mr. Salameh (pronounced SAH-lah-may) wasn't conclusive, but senior Carter-administration officials say they suspected it was the Israelis. These officials say that despite Mr. Salameh's terrorist back-

ground, President Carter "expressed concern" at his death.

The reason for President Carter's dismay was that for over five years, Mr. Salameh, with Mr. Arafat's apparent approval, had been providing the CIA with intelligence that helped protect U.S. diplomats from extremist attacks by Palestinians and other Arabs. He had also helped implement an understanding with the U.S. reached in November 1973, that Mr. Arafat's PLO main-

stream group, Fatah, wouldn't harm Americans. Moreover, according to a top U.S. official, "the U.S. had reason to believe that the Israelis knew" that Mr. Salameh was secretly helping the U.S.

The Salameh connection, which amounted to a backdoor channel between the U.S. and the PLO, is one of the most intriguing tales to emerge from the conspiracy-laden Middle East. It illustrates the complex intelligence operations undertaken by the U.S., the PLO and the Israelis in this region. It also shows how, on occasion, U.S. and Israeli interests can differ sharply.

The implications of the Salameh story are especially delicate now, when Mr. Arafat is exploring new links to the U.S. through President Reagan's peace initiative, and when U.S. officials are publicly questioning whether Israel is obstructing American policy. But this article isn't based on any "official leak" by the U.S., Israel or any PLO or other Arab faction. This reporter first heard a bare outline of the Salameh story more than two years ago and has assembled the details in bits and pieces since then.

'Extraordinarily Helpful'

Hermann Eilts, a former U.S. ambassador to Egypt and Saudi Arabia, says this of Mr. Salameh: "Over the years I was in government, I learned a good deal about his activities. I know that on a good many occasions, in a nonpublic fashion, he was extraordinarily helpful—as was Fatah—in assisting in security for American citizens and officials. I regard his assassination as a loss."

There probably won't ever be firm evidence about who killed Mr. Salameh, since he had enemies in the radical Arab camp as well as in Israel. But the consensus of senior Carter-administration officials familiar with the case is that the Israelis killed him largely in revenge for his earlier terrorist activities as a planner for the shadowy Black September group. These officials believe that Mr. Salameh's relationship with the U.S. wasn't an inhibition to the Israelis. In fact, severing this PLO link to the U.S. may have been "a political benefit (for the Israelis), in addition to a simple settling of scores," says a former top-level U.S. official.

Morton Dolinsky, the director of the Israeli government press office in Jerusalem, declines to discuss the circumstances of Mr. Salameh's death. An Israeli intelligence source asserts, however, that Mr. Salameh was killed by a team drawn from the Israeli army and the Israeli foreign-intelligence service, known as Mossad. This man explains: "Ali was a target because of his many operations against Israel and Jews in Europe."

Clarifying Complexities

The following account of Mr. Salameh's life and death is based on discussions with former U.S. officials, top PLO officials, several Israelis and some of Mr. Salameh's

participant in a stratagem by Mr. Salameh to develop closer ties with the U.S. A former top-level U.S. official explains that Mr. Salameh was "less an individual who was a source than a channel; he wasn't someone doing anything against his superior's wishes."

"Ali was a door to very strong relations with the Americans," says a member of the Fatah central committee. He confirms that Mr. Salameh sent a series of specific messages to the U.S., but he insists that "Ali was instructed in everything" by Mr. Arafat and other PLO leaders. "We played this role to get with the Americans," this PLO official says.

Mr. Salameh, known by the nickname Abu Hassan, was widely viewed in Beirut as Mr. Arafat's right-hand man. Only 37 years old when he died, he headed Mr. Arafat's Fatah security and intelligence unit, with up to 3,700 members and a monthly budget of \$1.5 million. The unit was known as Squad 17, apparently because Mr. Salameh's office was extension 17 on the PLO military telephone network.

He was a tall, handsome man, and even his close friends concede he was something of a playboy. He liked to drink whiskey, drawing an occasional reproach from Mr. Arafat, a devout Moslem. And he loved beautiful women, including the 1971 Miss Universe—a Lebanese-Christian woman named Georgina Rizk—who became his second wife.

Israeli intelligence officers who tracked him were struck by his European manner, and one still refers to him by the flamboyant code name Mossad gave him: "The red prince." By 1979, Mr. Salameh's daily habits made him an easy target. He traveled often between the houses of his first wife, a Palestinian woman from Haifa named Nashrawan Hassan Sharif, and his new bride, Georgina. He also made regular visits to his health club in the Beirut International Hotel for saunas and exercise.

Despite Mr. Salameh's charming qualities, he was unquestionably also a terrorist who had planned the deaths of many Israelis during the early 1970s. Indeed, according to one of his Arab friends, he planned the June 1973 murder of an Israeli military attache, Col. Yosef Alon, in Washington itself. Even a PLO official says he was disturbed by Mr. Salameh's terrorist role. "I thought Ali could do more away from this kind of work," he says.



Ali Hassan Salameh